

## Weingarten S (2003). Food in Daniel 1:1-16: the first controlled experiment?



© Susan Weingarten, Department of Classical Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, Israel. E-mail: [weingml@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:weingml@post.tau.ac.il)

The book of Daniel is full of miracles and visions - Daniel in the Lions' Den, the Three Boys in the Fiery Furnace, Belshazzar's Feast - to name only the most familiar, so at first sight it may seem very strange that we should have here what is perhaps the first example of a controlled experiment. But if we look at the additions to Daniel in the apocrypha, we find that we have another first - the first detective story, Bel and the Dragon, where Daniel solves the problem using logical thinking worthy of Sherlock Holmes. Thus the mixture of extreme rationality and divine miracle is quite typical of this book.

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The Hebrew word here translated 'vegetables' by the *New English Bible* is 'zer'onim', literally seeds, translated by Jerome in the *Vulgate* as *legumina*, legumes or pulses. Jerome was here, as elsewhere, clearly familiar with Jewish traditions, which specify that the seeds eaten by Daniel and his friends were pulses. Other Jewish commentaries on the *Bible* also say that when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus' harem and given all the food, perfumes and adornments she could want to prepare her for the king (Esther 2), she, like Daniel, refused the king's foods and ate only pulses. Both Daniel and his friends and Esther presumably ate bread too, but because this was the basic component of everyone's diet it is not even mentioned.

The book of Daniel here stresses the miraculous nature of the events - in spite of not eating rich food and wine the Jews were even healthier than the others, as demonstrated by the ten-day experiment. Because they kept to their ancestral traditions, it is implied, they were rewarded by the special protection of God and looked healthier than others. But since we know that pulses, especially when eaten with bread, provide good sources of protein, we need not be surprised. Pulses were one of the commonest everyday foods in antiquity - from the 'pottage of lentils' for which Esau sold his birthright in the book of Genesis (27:29) to the luxury Roman cookbook attributed to Apicius, where all of one of the ten books is devoted to pulses. Eating what they were used to would also have protected Daniel and his friend against stomach upsets due to change of diet and gorging lots of rich food from the king's table. The real miracle here, perhaps, was that Daniel and his friends were not harmed by drinking water instead of wine. In the ancient world water was often contaminated, hence the practice of drinking it mixed with wine which would have acted as a sort of antiseptic.

Modern commentators use this episode as evidence in dating the book of Daniel. Earlier Jewish sources, while banning the eating of specific forbidden foods like pork, did not put a blanket prohibition on all gentile food. King Jehoiachim (mentioned in verse 1 above) in exile ate at the king's table in Babylon every day (Jeremiah 52:33; II Kings 25:29). But by the Hasmonean period: 'Many in Israel took courage not to eat any unclean food, and they chose to die rather than be defiled by foods...' (I Maccabees 1:62-63). Gentile food had become suspect of being connected to pagan ritual so that it was considered preferable to suffer martyrdom rather than eat it. This episode from the book of Daniel is thus seen as showing attitudes characteristic of this period (2nd - 1st centuries BCE).

### Bibliography

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